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Epilogue

539

Slavery chain done broke at last!
Broke at last! Broke at last!
Slavery chain done broke at last!
Gonna praise God till I die!

Way up in that valley,
Pray-in' on my knees,
Tell-in' God a-bout my troubles,
And to help me if He please.

I did tell him how I suffer,
In the dungeon and the chain;
And the days I went with head bowed down,
An' my broken flesh and pain.

I did know Jesus heard me,
'Cause the spirit spoke to me,
An' said, "Rise, my chile, your children
An' you too shall be free."

I done 'p'int one mighty captain
For to marshal all my hosts;
An' to bring my bleeding ones to me,
An' not one shall be lost."

Now no more weary trav'lin',
'Cause my Jesus set me free,
An' there's no more auction block for me
*Since He give me liberty.**

The Thirteenth Amendment, which ended all slavery in the United States, barely slipped through the House of Representatives with the necessary two-thirds vote on January 31, 1865. But for the Gullahs, the "Year of Jubilo" was January 1, 1863, when Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared them "forever free." It was the first truly Happy New Year the Gullahs ever had, and they marked it with a festive occasion organized by General Saxton. The celebration took place in Beaufort. The multitude consisted of the "First South" Regiment, many "white visitors," superintendants, officers, dignitaries, and the band of the Eighth Maine. From the Islands and surrounding mainland came the now for-

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* Quoted from Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 167.

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175 mer slaves, "chiefly colored woman with gay handkerchiefs on their heads, and a sprinkling of men" (since most able-bodied males were in the army). •541 All the blacks reportedly "had the bearing and distinct respectable look 569 they always had on Sundays and holidays." The services began with a prayer. The Emancipation Proclamation was read by William Brisbane, a South Carolinian who freed his slaves before the war. Then the chaplin presented the colors to the regiment—all according to program. After the chaplin's introductory remarks, and just as Higginson "took and waved the flag," but before he began to speak, the "unexpected," and "startling" occurred. A "strong" but "cracked and elderly" male voice was heard. Instantly, two female voices blended in as if by "an impulse too strong to be repressed." They sang:

> My Country, 'tis of thee,
> Sweet land of liberty,
> Of thee I sing!

They went on "verse after verse" as the people on the platform appeared stunned. "It seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed," Higginson wrote. The rest of the blacks joined in and the whites also began, but Higginson motioned the latter to silence. "I never saw anything so electric," he wrote. "It made all other words seem cheap." "Art," wrote Higginson, "could not have dreamed of a tribute to the day of Jubilee . . . history will not believe it . . . tears were everywhere." Corporal Robert Sutton, a favorite of Higginson's, spoke, vowing that no black soldier would rest until all his brothers and sisters were free. "Boys," he vowed, "we will take Christ for our Captain who never lost a battle."[1]

175 The moment of freedom, more than any event, bound African-Amer- 569 icans to Christianity. Their deliverance from the house of bondage "by no man,"[2] as they believed, did more to instill faith in Christianity than any doctrines taught by whites.

567 Although religious instruction was intended as a conservative element 771 in slave life, and clearly it did not provide the bondspeople with a suc- 177 cessful ideology of revolt, slave religion, a synthesis of African and 178 Christian traditions, was used in a progressive manner by slaves. Their application of collective moral principles under the guise of Christianity illustrates how religion can be used effectively to keep a community spiritually alive and culturally creative during a period of historical crisis. Although religion was at the heart of the Gullahs' process of socialization